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# The Effects of a Grammar Error Correction Session on Language Learners' Success

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## Abstract

Error correction has a significant place in language teaching classrooms since language learning involves some kind of a trial and error process during which learners test their language related hypotheses. The present study sought to examine the effects of a grammar error correction session on 64 eleventh grade high school students' success in a grammar test. The pre-test post-test quasi-experimental design involving the experimental and control groups was used in the study. In the data collection procedure, two parallel grammar tests were implemented to the learners. Results showed an increase in learners' mean scores in the grammar test used as the post-test, which the learners took following the error correction session. However, the increase in the learners' grades was not at a statistically significant level. The positive effects of the remedial error correction session were not explicit in the study.

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**Keywords:** Grammar error correction; corrective feedback; students' success.

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## 1. Introduction

Language teachers generally feel the urge to correct students' errors in foreign language teaching classrooms. They may choose overt error correction techniques or subtler ways of correction like paraphrasing students' errors. Whether or not error correction works in language teaching classrooms is one of the hot topics all around the world. Researchers have tried to explain what effects error correction has on students' overall success in attaining the grammar patterns; what kind of error correction techniques could be used effectively in the classroom; how error correction should be linked to grammar teaching for decades. It may not be denied that in many countries in the world, grammar teaching is still an important part of foreign language teaching. In this sense, the correction of grammar errors and its effects on students' success are important concepts for both language teachers and learners.

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Grammar teaching has a long history going back to the times when Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was a fashion in language teaching. In accordance with the principles of this method, students' errors should be corrected by the teacher explicitly and immediate error correction is considered as indispensable. After GTM lost its popularity, some subsequent language teaching methods aroused like Desuggestopedia or Community Language Learning. In such methods, students' grammatical errors are corrected in an unobtrusive way. As it can be observed from this short summary, there is some variety in the way grammar errors are corrected both in spoken and in written texts.

While teaching a language, teachers use lots of written grammar exercises for practice purposes in their classes. Naturally, students make some grammar errors in these written exercises. Teachers generally correct them in written form and give the papers back to students. In this way, they could see the problematic areas of the grammar structure about which students need further instruction. Apart from the written feedback on students' errors, teachers can carry out remedial error correction sessions concerning the problematic areas and help learners overcome the gaps in their learning. These lessons can be carried out by taking the errors students make in the written exercises into consideration. If these error correction sessions are influential, students can be more successful in grasping especially the difficult grammar structures.

### *1.1. Purpose of the study*

The main aim of the current study is to find out whether or not a remedial grammar error correction session carried out by taking the students' errors in a written grammar exercise into account has a positive effect on students' success. The grammar structure examined in the study was the simple past tense. In this study, the term grammar error correction session was used to indicate that the teacher carried out a lesson in which she tried to pinpoint the most problematic areas of students' knowledge of the simple past tense structure, which she identified previously according to the results of a written grammar test implemented to the language learners. The research questions formulated in accordance with the main aims of the study are as follows:

- 1) Is there any statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups' grades before and after the grammar error correction session?
- 2) Does the remedial error correction session have any effect on language learners' success in a grammar post-test?

## **2. Literature Review**

What language learners and teachers think about the place of error correction in grammar teaching is an important subject as error correction constitutes an important

part of the language teaching and learning process in the classroom. Some researchers conducted studies to have some insights about learners' and teachers' opinions concerning that issue. As an early example, Schulz (1996) tried to discover students' and teachers' opinions related to the role of explicit grammar teaching and error correction in language learning. It was found out students and teachers had contrary beliefs about the place of error correction in language learning. In a similar study on the role of grammar instruction and corrective feedback, Schulz (2001) revealed that students had positive views about the explicit grammar instruction and corrective feedback in contrast to the teachers having negative views. Likewise, Liao and Wang (2009) found out that high school students and teachers had considerably different opinions about the grammar instruction and error correction. As for the perceptual differences about error correction, the students favored teacher correction over peer correction since they saw the teachers as knowledgeable people while the teachers thought that teacher correction could be harmful for students due to emotional or motivational reasons.

There seems to be no consensus about the place and effects of grammar error correction on students' success among the researchers. For instance, Truscott (1996) opposed to grammar error correction in second language writing classes and also stated his views against grammar error correction in spoken contexts, providing attention to the possible harmful effects of it for students (Truscott, 1999). Additionally, he stated that grammar correction is ineffective and should not be used in the class. He argues that grammar error correction rules out the gradual process of acquiring structures and grammatical rules and it wastes time that should be used for more beneficial teaching learning activities in the class. On the other hand, Dekeyser (1993) wanted to observe the effect of error correction on second language grammar knowledge and oral proficiency and reached the conclusion that systematic error correction was influential for students' intake and grammar accuracy. Similarly, Lyster, Lightbown and Spada (1999) questioned Truscott's views on grammar error correction and stated that corrective feedback in grammar could be beneficial for students.

Ferris (2004) shed light on the effect of grammar error correction on students' writing abilities and showed the significant effects of written feedback on learners' accuracy. With the purpose of comparing different ways of feedback provision, the impact of explicit and implicit feedback on the acquisition of past tense –ed form was investigated by Ellis, Loewen, Erlam (2006) and the positive influences of especially the explicit corrective feedback were reported. Özkan and Kesen (2009) analyzed the effect of grammar intervention on students' success and found out that the intervention in the form of grammar instruction was useful for the attainment of the grammar structure being taught. Gitsaki and Althobaiti (2010) showed a review of the effective error correction techniques and student uptake of those techniques. Dawood (2014) also reported the positive effects of instant correction of university learners' errors on grammatical accuracy. In a similar study, Alshumaimeri (2015) showed the positive effects of error

correction on language learners' understanding of the grammatical structures and stated students' preference of immediate error correction of their faulty usage of grammar.

In the light of all these research studies conducted, it could be stated that there are some contradicting results considering the effectiveness of the grammar error correction practices. As it is obvious, there is a need for more research studies to provide further understanding of the place of remedial grammatical error correction in foreign language teaching classrooms and its effects on language learners' success about the attainment of the grammar structures.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Participants*

The sampling technique used in this study was the convenience sampling in which the students that the researcher could most easily reach were used. The participants were 64 eleventh grade high school students (males: 26, females: 38). Their ages range between 16 and 17. They take two hours of English instruction in a week. They all took English courses provided in the primary and secondary schools of Ministry of National Education in Turkey. Two eleventh grade classes consisting 29 and 35 students were used in the study, as the former being the experimental group and the latter being the control group.

#### *3.2. Instruments*

As the data collection tools, two grammar tests covering the simple past tense were implemented to the learners. The tests were prepared in a parallel way. They involve the similar questions so that they should measure the same learning outcomes. The grammar tests comprise the following parts: the gap filling exercises, the exercise requiring the students to use negative, positive and the interrogative forms of the past tense, ordering sentences and multiple choice questions.

#### *3.3. Design and procedure*

The quasi-experimental research design was implemented as the researcher did not have the opportunity to assign participants to the experimental and control groups on a random base. As stated earlier, 64 eleventh grade high school students were the participants of the study. The group consisting of 29 students was the experimental group and received the grammar error correction session as the treatment phase of the study. The other group consisting of 35 students was the control group not receiving the treatment. This remedial session aimed at recovering the most problematic areas of students' knowledge of the simple past tense in English. These problematic areas were detected by examining the grammar errors students made in the first test, which was the

pretest measure. Most of students' errors in the first test were about using the correct form of the verbs in the past tense, overgeneralization of the past tense ending –ed, the wrong usages of “was, were” and “did, didn't.”

The error correction procedure was as follows: without pointing to the owner of the error, the teacher supplied the students with the correct knowledge of the grammar errors they made. In a way, the teacher provided oral corrective grammar feedback to the learners and she did it explicitly together with trying to explain the possible reasons of their errors.

Both the experimental and the control groups took a test covering the grammatical structure which was the simple past tense as the pre-test measure. The rationale behind implementing a grammar test before the treatment was to see the initial group differences in terms of success and to detect the problematic usages of the simple past tense. Then, according to the problematic areas detected by the students' errors in this written grammar test, an error correction session took place in the experimental condition. This session took place one week after the implementation of the first grammar test. No error correction session was carried out in the control group. After, the teacher focused on the problematic areas of grammar in experimental condition, both the experimental and control groups took the second grammar test as the post-test measure. Post-tests were implemented to the learners in the second lesson of the week that they attended to the grammar error correction session. The aim was to observe whether the error correction session affected the students' success in the second grammar test or not.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

SPSS version 21 was used for all the statistical analysis. Initially, descriptive statistics were checked to observe if there was any visible problem in the data. To compare the experimental and control groups in terms of success in the posttest to detect any effects of the error correction session, independent samples *t*-test analysis was conducted. In addition to that, to see the difference of success in pretest and posttest within specific groups, paired sample *t*-test analysis was also conducted for both experimental and control groups.

## 4. Results

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the experimental and control groups' post-test results. No significant difference ( $p=.951>.05$ ) was detected between the results of the post-test concerning the experimental ( $M=48.86$ ,  $SD=18.38$ ) and the control group ( $M=49.14$ ,  $SD=17.70$ ) as reported in table 1.

Table 1. Success difference in the posttest for both groups

groups	N	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>
Experimental	29	48.86	18.38	.951
Control	35	49.14	17.70	

The paired samples *t*-test analysis was also conducted for both experimental and control groups to observe if there was any difference of success in two grammar tests within groups. The aim of using this analysis was to compare the results of the pre and post-tests for each group separately to detect any change in students' success. The results of the paired sample *t*-test for the experimental group were stated in table 2.

Table 2. The results of the experimental group in pretest and posttest

	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Pretest	29	40.34	17.32	-4.372	28	.000
Posttest	29	48.86	18.38			

As it can be observed in table 2, there is a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between the mean scores of the first ( $M=40.34$ ,  $SD=17.32$ ) and second grammar test ( $M=48.86$ ,  $SD=18.38$ ) of the experimental group. To show the mean difference of grades for the experimental group between the pre and posttest measures, figure 1 was placed below.

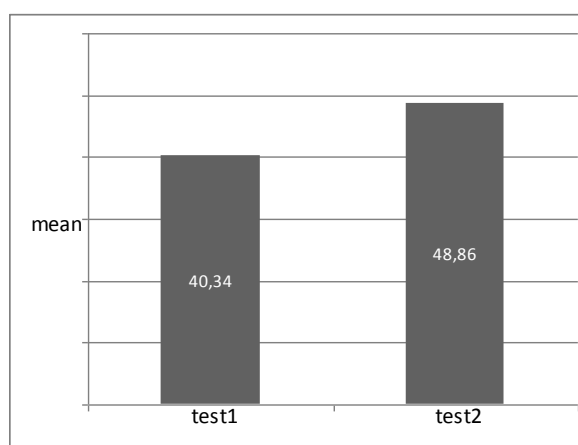


Figure 1. The mean difference of the two test results for the experimental group.

Additionally, a second paired samples t-test analysis was conducted to observe any change in the learners' grades in the first and the second grammar tests for the control group. The results were reported in table 3.

Table 3. The results of the control group in pretest and posttest

	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Pretest	35	44.05	20.47	-2.840	34	.008
Posttest	35	49.14	17.70			

Table 3 shows that there is a significant difference ( $p.008 < .05$ ) between the mean test scores of control group for pretest ( $M=44.05$ ,  $SD=20.47$ ) and the posttest ( $M=49.14$ ,  $SD=17.70$ ).

## 5. Discussion

One of the main aims of the study was to find out whether a remedial grammar error correction session had any effect on students' success on a grammar test carried out after the session. For this purpose, a quasi-experimental research design was implemented in which there were two groups as the experimental and the control. Only students in the experimental condition were exposed to the grammar error correction session.

While evaluating the results obtained at the end of the study, no statistically significant difference was detected between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post-test measure. For this reason, the groups were regarded as attaining similar success in the post-test. The important concept that should be taken into consideration is the difference in the increase of success for both groups. There is an increase in the mean scores of both groups in the second grammar test, which can result from various reasons. In the second test, students could simply be familiar with the test since they attended a similar grammar test a week before. As there was not a long time span between the applications of the pre and post-tests, for both groups, an increase in the success in the post-test can be an expected result.

The results showed that the scores of the learners in the experimental group increased more than the control group in the second grammar test. This is an important aspect in the study even if the success difference of two groups was not at a statistically significant level. One additional note is that the mean scores of the experimental and control groups were more far from each other in the pre-test. It could be stated that one group, which was the experimental group since the increase in their scores in the post-test was higher than the control group, might have benefited from the error correction session. In that case, it can be stated that error correction session may have had an effect on the students' success but it was not at the satisfied level. Further analysis shows that there

were statistically significant differences between pre and post-test scores of the students for both experimental and control groups.

As mentioned before, not only the group attending to the error correction session but also the control group increased their grades in the post-test. There can be different interpretations of this result. The students in the experimental group might not give their full attention to the teacher during the error correction session. Apart from that, the psychological mood of the students, the physical condition of the classroom like lightning, heat or even the time of the error correction session could influence the students' success. Additionally, low motivation to learn English could be a really important reason why the error correction did not make a considerable difference on students' success. On the other hand, this could simply mean that error correction did not work for the students as Truscott (1996) stated, grammar error correction could be ineffective for the students under some circumstances.

All these findings showed that the learners in the experimental group might have affected by the error correction session since the increase in their grades in the post-test was higher than the control group. On the other hand, as the increase in the both groups' success from the first to the second test was found to be statistically significant, it is not possible to state that the grammar error correction session made a considerable difference in success. Some other reasons could have affected the students' increased success. Like Truscott (1996) stated, grammar error correction could impede the gradual process of acquiring structures of a language. Especially for unmotivated and indifferent students, trying to take their attention to the problematic parts of their grammatical knowledge may not make considerable difference on their success. Learners may even see this error correction process as a threat. For such reasons, the students in the experimental group may not provide their full attention to the error correction session.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of a remedial grammar error correction session on language learners' success. The effect of error correction was not at a significant level in the current study. On the other hand, the change in the students' success for both experimental and control groups was found to be statistically significant. Namely, the participants of both the experimental and control groups increased their scores from pre-test to the post-test.

As it is known that experimental studies have many limitations and their use in the field of education has decreased. Among the limitations of this study, the sample size and the sampling procure could be counted. Not being able to use random sampling is a problem especially concerning the initial group differences between the experimental and control groups. Additionally, using quasi-experimental research design could create some validity problems. The way the teacher carried out error correction session could matter,



which was an explicit correction of the most problematic areas of students' grammar without paying attention to the individual students having the errors. It would be better if the teacher had been prepared additional materials for the students to help them practice these problematic areas but due to the time limitations, it was not possible in this study.

For further research, it could be better to use more participants to be able to generalize the findings for a larger population. Additionally, internal validity is generally low in quasi-experimental studies and forming cause and effect relationships is hard. For that reason, it could be better to use a true experimental design to see the exact relationship between grammar error correction and success. Non-experimental factors should also be taken under control for more valid and reliable results. Random sampling and random assignment of the participants can provide more valid results, as well. As the last suggestion, it can be better to interview the students and ask their opinions. In this way, more valuable insights could be reached about the effectiveness of remedial grammar error correction sessions from learners' perspectives.

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